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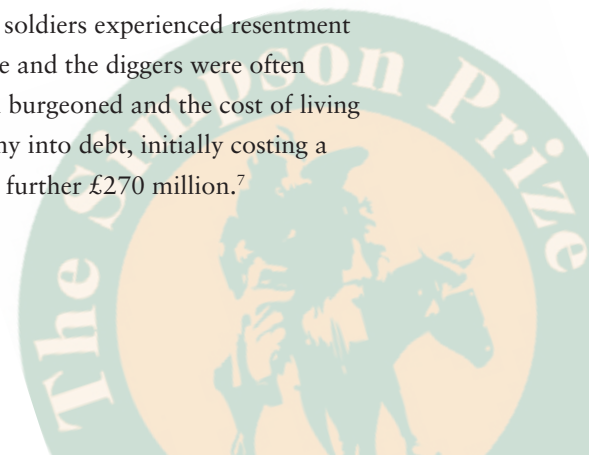
# *World War I had a devastating effect on Australian society. Why should we commemorate our participation in this conflict?*

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**by Nicholas Dyer, Shenton College**

The First World War was a defining event in Australia's history because it shaped our national identity and helped gain international respect for a fledgling nation. This war, still regarded by historians as 'without parallel in its bloodiness'<sup>1</sup>, led to an outpouring of private and public grief for the astounding number of casualties but most significantly it gave rise to the legend of the ANZAC spirit which still continues to shape our perception of what it means to be an Australian ninety years after Armistice Day. Commemoration of Australia's involvement in the First World War also marks the initial point at which we honour over 102,000 Australian servicemen and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice during active service in defence of Australian ideals.<sup>2</sup>

The First World War resulted in lasting changes to the fabric of Australian society. When war erupted in Europe, Australia, having only reached Federation thirteen years earlier, entered with naïve enthusiasm and little experience of international conflict apart from sending troops to support the British offensive in the Boer War. Australia entered the war eager to reaffirm loyalty to the British Empire. Spurred on by politicians and patriots and expecting swift victory, young volunteers rushed to enlist. As the casualties mounted on foreign battlefields and the war dragged on, the domestic front experienced upheaval and disenchantment. Two bitter and divisive conscription campaigns were fought and lost, resulting in the Labor Party begin torn apart and eventually exiled into opposition until 1929.<sup>3</sup> The War Precautions Act imposed heavy censorship of anti war sentiment and many people resented the threat to personal liberties. Australians of German origin often became victims of senseless hate campaigns and propaganda tried to extol the virtues of war.<sup>4</sup> Families at all levels of society experienced loss but there was a growing divide amongst social classes with the working class believing they were bearing the brunt of the war. Industrial unrest broke out in the wool and coal industry and general stoppages occurred amongst waterside and railway workers. Some returning soldiers experienced resentment from those that had carved out good jobs in their absence and the diggers were often allocated to ill-fated land reclamation schemes.<sup>5</sup> Inflation burgeoned and the cost of living rose by almost 47%.<sup>6</sup> The war effort plunged the economy into debt, initially costing a staggering £364 million pounds and post war expenses a further £270 million.<sup>7</sup>



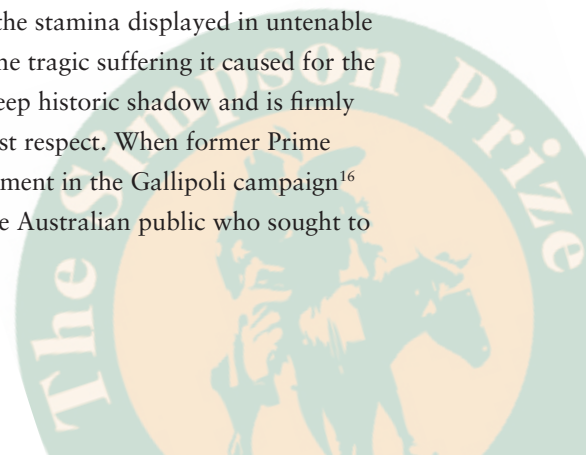
To add to society's woes the human toll was almost incomprehensible. With 59,342<sup>8</sup> Australians dying and a further 153, 731<sup>9</sup> wounded or gassed, thousands of men were psychologically scarred, never to recover and to become a burden on their families in a future blighted by the Great Depression and another impending world war.<sup>10</sup> For a nation with a population of 4.87 million the human loss was made more poignant by the fact that the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) consisted entirely of volunteers.

Such high casualties rates and the political, economic and social turmoil have undoubtedly shaped the nation. However, it is not the details of society's unrest we remember but rather the resulting emergence of a unified spirit and identity for a battle scarred nation. The ANZAC spirit was initially forged by the harsh campaign of Gallipoli but ratified by the sheer professionalism and valiant military achievements in the Middle East and Western Europe.

The performance of the AIF helped form a new cultural image and identity for all Australians. 'The soldiery reputation of the Diggers of the Australian Imperial Force rivals that of any army in the entire 3,500 years' recorded history of warfare – such is the consensus among military historians and generals'.<sup>11</sup> Australians are acquainted with the horrors of Gallipoli where 8,703<sup>12</sup> soldiers perished and believe this is where the ANZAC legend was born. Men, constantly under fire, lodged on narrow, hostile topography, endured inhumane conditions yet emerged from a military campaign which was ultimately judged a failure, with a reputation that would define the Australian spirit in ensuing years. The stereotype of the Australian soldier was one of a resourceful, egalitarian who displayed mateship, compassion, independence and courage. The soldiers also assumed the mantle of the tall, tanned, athletic bushman mythologised by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The AIF were to further enhance their reputation by fighting '[o]n the Western Front from April 1916 to November 1918 with a force that never numbered more than 122,000 men at any one time astonishing their allies with their impetuous courage and fortitude...'<sup>14</sup> Australian feats in the battles on the Western Front are less well known to the Australian public, yet 80% of First World War casualties occurred on the battlefields of Belgium and France and an astonishing 18,000 soldiers still have no known grave.<sup>15</sup>

Australia emerged from the First World War as an independent nation recognised at Versailles. Journalists and historians such as C.E.W. Bean were to paint a positive picture of the ANZAC forces and for families and friends of the men who died it provided some comfort for their widespread grief. The ANZAC legend was cultivated and transmitted from generation to generation and has now become the dominant memory of the First World War. The Second World War gave new inspiration to the ANZAC legend and it has evolved to embody the spirit of all Australians who have served in subsequent conflicts.

We commemorate ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day to remember the origins of our ANZAC spirit. We honour the courage, the bravery and the stamina displayed in untenable circumstances. We remember the carnage and reflect on the tragic suffering it caused for the soldiers and their families. The First World War casts a deep historic shadow and is firmly embedded in the Australian psyche as commanding utmost respect. When former Prime Minister Paul Keating recently criticised the AIF's involvement in the Gallipoli campaign<sup>16</sup> his comments were met with a torrent of outrage from the Australian public who sought to



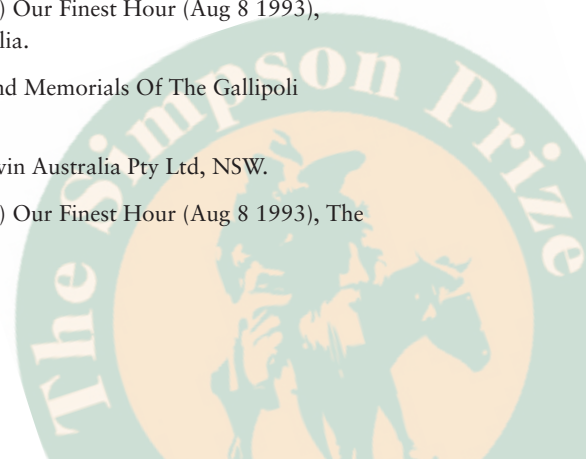
defend the almost sacrosanct ANZAC mythology. My homage is shaped by memories of my paternal great grandfather who survived the horrors of the Western Front but sadly recalled the sights and smells of human suffering for the rest of his life.

Ninety years after the cessation of hostilities we are still reminded of the sacrifices made by service men and women in conflicts around the world. In May 2008 we honoured the haunting discovery of approximately 400 Australian and British soldiers found buried in a mass grave on the outskirts of Fromelles. We also continue to honour the memory of those fighting in contemporary conflicts such as Lieutenant Michael Fussell, who died 4 December 2008, the seventh Australian killed in active service in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

At the opening of the United Nations Organisation Conference on Anzac Day in 1945, the Mayor of San Francisco questioned whether the Allies had ‘achieved anything of value by their victory’<sup>18</sup> in the First World War. I would have proudly told him Australians gained a national identity, which embodies a story of bravery and sacrifice and a deep faith in ourselves as an independent nation. We also gained a legend that helps us cope with the grief and suffering of war and for this reason our involvement in the First World War should always be celebrated.

### Endnotes

- 1 Hall, J, “*Salute To The Unforgotten*,” in J Hall (ed) *Our Finest Hour* (Aug 8 1993), The Weekend Australian, Nationwide News Pty Ltd, Australia.
- 2 Moran, R, “*They Gave Their Tomorrow So We Could Have Our Today*,” (April 25 2008), The West Australian Special Supplement.
- 3 Honer, D, “*The Fight That Changed Australia*,” in J Hall (ed) *Our Finest Hour* (Aug 8 1993), The Weekend Australian, Nationwide News Pty Ltd, Australia.
- 4 Darlington, R (1987) *Lands of Hopes and Illusions*, Shakespeare Press, Australia.
- 5 Mason, KJ (2005) *Experiences of Nationhood: Modern Australia Since 1901*, McGraw-Hill Australia Pty Ltd, Australia.
- 6 Dennis, L (1980) *Australia: 1890-1974*, Witcombe and Tombs Pty Ltd, Australia.
- 7 C E W Bean, *ANZAC to Amiens* (1983 reprint), Australian War Memorial <http://www.awm.gov.au/histories/chapter.asp?volume=1>
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- 10 Honer, D, “*The Fight That Changed Australia*,” in J Hall (ed) *Our Finest Hour* (Aug 8 1993), The Weekend Australian, Nationwide News Pty Ltd, Australia.
- 11 Laffin, Dr J, “*We Are On A Great Enterprise*,” in J Hall (ed) *Our Finest Hour* (Aug 8 1993), The Weekend Australian, Nationwide News Pty Ltd, Australia.
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- 13 Beaumont, J (1995) *Australia’s War 1914-18*, Allen and Urwin Australia Pty Ltd, NSW.
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- 15 Anon, *Australian Battlefields of World War I – France* (2008), Computer Information Agency, [www.ciaops.com/guides/battle/](http://www.ciaops.com/guides/battle/)
- 16 *Keating's ANZAC Pot Shots Miss Mark* (2008) The West Australian newspaper, <http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=9&ContentID=107547>
- 17 McPhedran, I, *Fallen Digger Michael Fussell coming home from Afghanistan*, (2008) Daily Telegraph <http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,27574,24737110-5006009,00.html>
- 18 C E W Bean, *ANZAC to Amiens* (1983 reprint), Australian War Memorial <http://www.awm.gov.au/histories/chapter.asp?volume=1>

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